BILL MATTHEWS BREAKS DOWN

By

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I could tell by the way she looked at Bill that my sister Jane loved the big sap. But she was such a quiet little mouse that I was sure none of the family suspected and where women were concerned, Bill was as blind as a bat.

The best friend I ever had, Bill Matthews was one of those tall, lean individuals, coppered Indian brown by wind and weather. He had taught me all I know of hunting, trapping and the lore of the woods. Indoors he was shy and silent, patiently accepting the bustling fussiness with which my mother surrounded all the lonely men of the bushland who stopped at our home. He wasn't exactly chatty outdoors either but he managed to convey his thoughts and impart the knowledge he wished me to absorb.

Lately he had been even more silent that was his wont. One recent afternoon he had murmured to me abruptly that he guessed he'd better give up his roaming existence, buy a farm and settle down. Dolt that I was, I hadn't sense enough to realize that he was gingerly plumbing me. Already the quiet strength that was Janey's finest quality of character was disturbing the heart of my friend.

Our home was on the outskirts of one of those Northern Alberta towns that spring up about the coal mines. When the mines were in operation, the men of our family were miners, but as this labor was so precarious, my father had bought the farm at which he worked indifferently. Life was a perpetual struggle for existence and without the cheery, vital flame that was my mother, it would have been downright carking misery. While inheriting mother's vitality, Jane lacked her vivacity so that we of the family had come to regard Janey as a mere shadow of mother's hearty materiality. The shrewd, kindly penetration of Bill Matthews had slowly appraised her worth but he was too shy to speak his mind and he doubted me as a possible ally. He kept silent counsel.

I had been teasing Jane unmercifully about Bill, telling her that he was not interested in women because they were so squeamish over hunting and trapping, too weak physically to companion him in the life he loved. She was very patient with me, refusing even to argue, but I could tell by the way her jaw moulded to hardness that she intended to show Bill Matthews a thing or two. The opportunity soon presented itself.

It was a bright spring morning when we set for that week-end in the woods. Father had reckoned he could spare me for a couple of days and it was in a spirit of carefree exultation that I bade good-bye to my tiresome round of chores and set out with Bill. The trees and the ground were covered with white but the clear blue sky and the rising ball of fire in the east promised a speedy death to the hoarfrost.

As we reached the summit of the rise behind the farmhouse, Bill looked back. I turned to see what was holding his attention and noticed a square of white dishcloth waving from the kitchen door.

"It's Jane." I said, and added smugly, "Too bad she can't come with us but a woman's place is in the kitchen, isn't it, Bill?

He did not reply, so I tried to smooth over the awkwardness of the moment.

"Of course, Jane really is fun on a trek. She's a wonderful shot, you know."

We plunged into the forest before Bill spoke again.

"Did you say your sister could shoot?" he asked.

"Oh yes," I replied, "dad taught us all to look out for ourselves. We all can shoot after a fashion, but Jane - she's a humdinger. Honestly, Bill, she can outshoot any man in the neighborhood and when it comes to bringing home the venison, well - dad would rather send Jane out than any of the boys."

Bill thought this over for a moment, then spoke.

"I had no idea Jane ever moved away from the house, Buddy. She's never mentioned this side of her life to me."

"Oh, Jane isn't the bragging kind," I explained, " but if you were interested in women, she'd be just the girl for you. Of course," I added hastily, "I know you're not interested in the critters and it's just as well. I'd never see anything of you if you were loaded down with a family like pop."

Evidently the turn in the conversation did not suit him for we had no more of it.

Evening found us many miles from home enjoying our scanty supper of small game, bagged during the day, and sourdough biscuits, the pride of Bill's culinary art. Appetites satisfied, we rolled out our sleeping bags and prepared for the night. The silence of vast spaces was always disquieting to me and I never enjoyed spending a night by myself in such a spot as we were now camped. I felt this to be a weakness in myself but I could not seem to overcome it and secretly I was ashamed of it. Not for worlds would I confess it to my pal, who seemed to reach the acme of content in just such a situation. Nor would I confess that my sister had no fear of the loneness of the woods and spent many happy hours away from the haunts of man whenever her duties would permit her some freedom. Like those who love the splatter of the rain when roofed and snugly in bed, I revelled in the sense of isolation coupled with the warm knowledge that should I stretch out my hand it would touch the substantial frame of my slumbering companion.

Morning broke clear and cold. It was with reluctance that I pulled myself out from the warm eiderdown and followed Bill to the little stream for a hasty ablution. As we were returning to our camp we were startled by the sound of a shot. Startled was putting it mildly. When one is far from the beaten track one does not expect to hear the sound of firing break almost in one's ear.

"Indian?" suggested Bill.

We rushed to the brow of the hill. Just beyond our camp the land sloped gently into a little valley. The incline down from

our hillock was thinly wooded so that we gained a clear view of the meadow land below. It seemed to be very marshy just where the stream flowed in a series of tiny waterfalls into it, but beyond was solid ground, treeless until one reached the further bank that rose sharply from the valley floor.

With amazing speed my gaze took in the scene below. I saw the prone shape of a cow moose lying on the firm earth beyond the marsh, apparently dropped by the shot we had just heard. Beyond it, a tiny figure stood, clothed in blue denim trousers and a leather jacket with a splash of red on its head. With a gasp of surprise I recognized Jane's red toque.

A thousand questions dazzled my brain. How did she get here? And why? Did she follow us intentionally? Then the remembrance of the set of her stubborn little chin as I teased her flashed through my mind and I realized she was staging her little show, intentionally or otherwise, for the sole benefit of Bill Matthews. I realized that she must have thrown down the dish towel and grabbed her good old 303 the moment we disappeared over the hill. Even Jane could not follow our trail through the blackness of night.

I looked again. She seemed to be standing so nonchalantly, with never a care, as though she were completely unaware that the biggest bull-moose I had ever seen was charging down upon her with all the snorting ferocity of which he was capable.

"My God," moaned Bill at my side, "she hasn't even seem him. I've got to get my gun!"

Despite my apprehension, I smiled. Before he could take ten steps it would all be over.

"Wait!" I cautioned.

In less time than that it was over. It was beautiful to see with what calm poise Jane suddenly dropped on one knee, swung the rifle as if without aiming while the second shot shattered the still of the morning.

The rush of the big animal carried him almost to where she knelt but his number was up.

I found myself executing a fancy war dance and yelling

like mad.

"Bull's eye! Good old Janey! Bull's eye!"

I knew without going one step nearer that Jane had caught old Mr. Moose right between the eyes.

Then I realized I was alone. I could hear Bill tearing madly through the brush and soon he came out in the clear below me and waded the swamp as though a grizzly was on his tail. I could hear him bellowing, "Jane, oh Jane!" with a roar that would have shamed the recently deceased quadruped. Jane waited quietly until he reached her, but I noticed her arms did not linger as he swept her into his mighty clasp. I took another quick gander to be sure the clinch would last, then I turned and walked slowly back , feeling mighty proud. Proud that Jane should give such an almighty fine exhibition of the stuff that was in her, proud that I was going to have such a swell guy for my brother-in-law.

I could just picture Jane down there, telling him all about how she trailed us, how she spent the night within the smell of our campfire, how she used the big game as the final lever to make Bill Matthews break down.

"Gosh," I thought, as I gave the fire a kick, " I don't know how mother will feel about it, but I'll bet dad will be durned glad to exchange one daughter for all that moose meat."